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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000558

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR BG

SUBJECT: FOREIGN AFFAIRS ADVISER DISCUSSES NEED TO CHANGE
THE WAY BANGLADESH IS GOVERNED

REF: A. DHAKA 536

- 1B. DHAKA 537
- 1C. DHAKA 548
- 1D. DHAKA 491

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Classified By: Amb. James F. Moriarty, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Bangladesh's Foreign Affairs Adviser Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury outlined his vision for a new government following national elections in December. In a May 15 meeting with the Ambassador, Chowdhury said Bangladesh needed a government that did not marginalize the opposition as had been the case in the past. According to Chowdhury, Bangladesh also needs a strong, neutral President in the new government to ensure the reforms of the Caretaker Government (CTG) are not rolled back. Chowdhury said the CTG was willing to negotiate with the two former Prime Ministers and allow them to play a leadership role in their parties, but he drew the line at the ladies holding elected office. Chowdhury did not make clear, however, how the CTG will sell this vision to the parties -- and whether it is a vision shared by Bangladesh's military leaders.

PREPARING FOR ELECTIONS

12. (C) The Ambassador called on the Foreign Affairs Adviser May 15 to deliver the Secretary's letter on Kosovo and discuss other matters (Refs A-C). A few days before, Bangladesh's Chief Adviser had addressed the nation, setting the third week in December 2008 as a target for national elections, outlining parameters for formal political dialogue between the CTG and the political parties, and announcing a gradual relaxation of restrictions on political activity. Adviser Chowdhury said the Caretaker Government had two priorities for the coming months:

--creating an environment that permits political activity but does not revert to the political violence that characterized the runup to previous elections; and

--developing a charter through dialogue with the parties to set a course for the new government that continues reforms initiated by the Caretaker Government and that gives the opposition a constructive role to play.

¶13. (C) Chowdhury told the Ambassador it was vital for Bangladesh to change its winner-take-all political system; "the cost of defeat should not be to lose everything." He said only by allowing the losing political party to have a role in governance would Bangladesh be able to avoid having people take to the streets to protest election results. The current Advisers would like to see an outcome where both the winning and losing parties came away with something -- perhaps a proportional allocation of cabinet ministries. The zero-sum game of past elections was "untenable," according to Chowdhury, who warned that the political party that held out for everything, "may get nothing."

A STRONGER PRESIDENCY?

¶14. (C) A key element of Chowdhury's vision is strengthening the role of Bangladesh's presidency. The new President, he suggested, should be a neutral party, somewhat independent of the ruling party, with a mandate to preserve and expand reforms introduced by the the Caretaker Government. For Chowdhury, such a figure would have a "moderating influence," which would discourage the newly elected government from reverting to bad habits. The Ambassador noted that civil society could also be a watchdog of the new government, but Chowdhury replied that many civil society groups had become highly politicized, which had diminished public respect for these institutions.

ROLE OF THE LADIES

¶15. (C) Chowdhury indicated the CTG might be willing to negotiate on the subject of the new government's composition

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with the two jailed former Prime Ministers, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. He acknowledged that "it was time to go to the top of the parties to get resolution" on key issues. However, this willingness to negotiate still did not extend to allowing the ladies to hold public office. Chowdhury said the CTG would be willing to accept a "Sonia Gandhi solution," whereby the ladies retained leadership of and power within their parties, but did not hold elected office. Chowdhury concluded by saying, however, that this solution would be off the table if the ladies were convicted of any of the crimes for which they are on trial.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) Chowdhury's comments echo previous discussions of the Caretaker Government's exit strategy (Ref D). While the CTG's vision of its hoped-for exit strategy is clearer, it is unclear how the CTG will convince the political parties to sign on to these concepts. It is also unclear to what extent Bangladesh's military leaders ascribe to this vision. Chowdhury is correct in the view that Bangladesh's democracy has lacked a "loyal opposition" that plays a constructive role in government. But, as the Ambassador pointed out to the Foreign Affairs Adviser, the Caretaker Government will have to sell this notion to the winning party.

Moriarty